

READING 1.2 CARAVAGGIO: THE CONSTRUCTION OF AN ARTISTIC PERSONALITY

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Compare two accounts of Caravaggio's personality: Giovanni Bellori's brief 1672 text and Howard Hibbard's *Caravaggio*, published in 1983. Bellori says that Caravaggio, like the ancient sculptor Demetrius, cared more for naturalism than for beauty. Choosing models, not from antique sculpture, but from the passing crowds, he aspired 'only to the glory of colour.'¹ Caravaggio abandoned his early Venetian manner in favor of 'bold shadows and a great deal of black' because of 'his turbulent and contentious nature.' The artist expressed himself in his work: 'Caravaggio's way of working corresponded to his physiognomy and appearance. He had a dark complexion and dark eyes, black hair and eyebrows and this, of course, was reflected in his painting 'The curse of his too naturalistic style was that 'soon the value of the beautiful was discounted.'

Some of these claims are hard to take at face value. Surely when Caravaggio composed an altarpiece he did not just look until 'it happened that he came upon someone in the town who pleased him,' making 'no effort to exercise his brain further.' While we might think that swarthy people look brooding more easily than blonds, we are unlikely to link an artist's complexion to his style. But if portions of Bellori's text are alien to us, its structure is understandable. He discusses the origin of Caravaggio's style and tells why it created a sensation in Rome, comparing Caravaggio with his rival, Annibale Carracci.

We have no real knowledge of Piero's personality or political opinions. By contrast, enough is known about Caravaggio's life to make a film about him. And so his art can be described differently. Whereas interpretations of Piero's painting focus on his iconography, Caravaggio's work is often related to his life. Hibbard's 'Afterthoughts' offers a psychoanalytic account of his subject. Caravaggio's repeated conjunction of young boys and bald elders shows him both seeking 'to retrieve a father whom he lost when ... only six' and also, unconsciously, punishing that father. As he depicted the beheading of Saint John, and 'decapitation is ... symbolic castration, perhaps Caravaggio unconsciously feared punishment for sexual thoughts or deeds. 'His *Medusa* and *David with the Head of Goliath*' reflect ... the psychological origins of homosexuality (i.e. exaggerated fear of the female genitals ...)' and 'comment on his own conscious experience with a younger homosexual partner.' As Goliath, Caravaggio 'is bitten by his young lover ... David.' His chiaroscuro 'expresses an unusual personality,' one whose 'world was made up of a few friends set against a background of nameless "others".'²

¹ Howard Hibbard, *Caravaggio* (New York 1983); Bellori is quoted in Walter Friedlaender *Caravaggio Studies* (Princeton, 1955), 245–54.

² Hibbard: *Caravaggio* 251–61, Laurie Schneider, 'Donatello and Caravaggio: The Iconography of Decapitation.' *American Imago* 33 (1976), 90.

Just as Lavin's account of Piero's work differs from Vasari's *ekphrasis*, so Hibbard's 'Afterthoughts' is very different from Bellori's text. Bellori's nine pages, the fullest early biography, refer to no other texts; in the eleven pages of his 'Afterthoughts,' Hibbard takes note of Longhi's view of Caravaggio's homosexuality and Alfred Moir's account of his drawing, borrows from Herwarth Röttgen's and Laurie Schneider's psychoanalytic accounts, notes Mahon's theory of Caravaggio's visual quotations, and adapts Rudolf Wittkower's description of his *tenebroso*. It is easy to see that Bellori thinks of art differently than we do. Today, however, Hibbard's psychoanalytic account seems as dated as Clark's imitation of Pater. Like many much less knowledgeable commentators, Hibbard views Caravaggio's painting as an art of self-expression. I will not comment on the obvious limitations of his account of the link between homosexuality and castration anxiety. What interests me more is how he weaves one bit of factual evidence into this narrative.

'All my sins are mortal' – so Francesco Susinno's 1724 account claims Caravaggio said after painting *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist* (1608). What are we to make of this anecdote? Upon entering a church and being given holy water, 'Caravaggio asked ... what was the purpose of it, and the answer was that it would erase any venial sin. "It is not necessary", he replied, "since all my sins are mortal".'³ A familiar of Cardinal del Monte could not be ignorant of the purpose of holy water. Caravaggio's question could be ironical and his reply sincere, as Hibbard assumes in attributing guilt to the painter, but maybe he was just being provocative.

Just as Ginzburg's reconstruction of Piero's career creates a full narrative from very incomplete data, so the same is true here of Hibbard. We really do not know whether Caravaggio felt guilty for his aggressive actions, and this psychoanalytic interpretation of *Medusa* and *David with the Head of Goliath*, we will see, is not altogether plausible. Like any skilled writer, Hibbard achieves narrative closure by making his conclusion seem inevitable. Caravaggio was 'moving toward a tragic, terrific end in his later art.' This statement fits with Hibbard's idea that the painter felt guilty and so sought punishment. But if the late images of the beheading of Saint John and the burial of the martyred Saint Lucy support this theory, the existence of two versions of *The Adoration of the Shepherds* and a *Resurrection of Lazarus* does not. Much of Caravaggio's late art is about birth and rebirth. Hibbard makes his death seem inevitable, but Caravaggio was not a tragic hero, a man who must suffer catastrophe in the last act.

In Chapter 2, I introduced the idea that an artwriter's text is best understood as a continuous narrative constructed from a limited group of facts.⁴ The present chapter discusses many texts, most of them recent. To analyze these texts, I will break them up into ten codes.⁵ By a 'code' I mean a distinctive way of describing an artwork. Four of these ten codes appear in both seicento and modern accounts of Caravaggio: *contemporary commentary*, *naturalism/realism*, *playacting*, and *public response*. Six occur

³ Quoted in Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 386. Susinno's text is unreliable.; Hibbard omits 'some extraneous material that shows Susinno to be both garrulous and credulous.'

⁴ This idea, extensively developed by narratologists, can be found in Freud, who contrasts what he calls analysis and synthesis: 'So long as we trace the development from its final outcome backwards, the chain of events appears continuous... But if we proceed the reverse way ... then we no longer get the impression of an inevitable sequence of events'. (*The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed J. Strachey [London, 1955], 18: 167).

⁵ Here I make use of Roland Barthes, *S/Z.*, trans. R. Howard (New York, 1974). Barthes is interested in how Balzac uses clichés to create his text. I am concerned with phrases repeated by artwriters.

only in recent accounts: *allegory/symbolism, attributions, cultural history, homosexuality, pictorial quotation/self-expression, and theories of art*. These codes overlap, and there is nothing special about the number ten. A different analysis may find more or different codes. What matters is only that some convenient system is adopted.

Allegory/Symbolism

Giovanni Baglione says that when you view *Boy Bitten by a Lizard*, 'you can almost hear the boy scream'.⁶ The work is a masterpiece of naturalism. A tradition of recent interpretation, however, find this picture an allegory that may reflect the artist's personal concerns. Noting 'the squeamishness and effeminacy ... of [the boy's] reaction', Donald Posner thinks that this leaves 'no doubt ... about the kind of youth Caravaggio represents.'⁷ A psychoanalyst adds: 'Part of the middle or love finger ... appears to be bitten off, castrated, as it were, by the artistic device of having a shadow cover the lower half of the finger.'⁸ Perhaps the picture shows 'a disillusionment with the world of the senses' that deliberately contrasts with a scene whose 'overt appearance is provocatively and even wittily sensuous.'⁹

But it is possible to appreciate the work without seeking any symbolism here, admiring how the action 'is frozen in a fraction of a second, as in a snapshot.'¹⁰ Hibbard, whose erudite account aims to be conciliatory, notes that 'whether we choose to read the picture as a private, even campy homosexual reference or as a more general warning against the evils of life, there is no avoiding the need to interpret.'¹¹ This is true, but if styles of interpretation change with the times, how may any of these modern accounts be justified? Today Posner's account seems visually convincing, but it is not supported by any evidence from the artist's time. Does that mean that we are better able to see Caravaggio's pictures than his contemporaries, or that Posner ahistorically projects modern concerns into the work?

If any depicted object may be treated as a symbol, where do we stop in our search for symbols? Calvesi finds that the violin in perspective in *Amor Vincit Omnia* 'alludes to the farsightedness and virginal love of Christ'; in the *Madonna di Loreto* the 'subject ... is really faith, symbolized by the two pilgrims, like Adam and Eve'; the X on the window in *The Calling of Saint Matthew* is 'the sign of the cross which divides the rectangle so that the window appears lined with an X, that of the similar symbol of love of Giordano Bruno'; and the red drapery in *The Death of*

⁶ Quoted in Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 352.

⁷ Donald Posner, 'Caravaggio's Homoerotic Early Works,' *Art Quarterly* 34 (1971), 304–5.

⁸ Hans J. Kleinschmidt, 'Discussion of Laurie Schneider's Paper,' *American Imago* 33 (1976), 96–97.

⁹ John Gash, *Caravaggio* (London 1980), 18. Posner's account is rejected by Leonard Slatkes, who argues that since lizards 'were believed to be deadly poisonous animals ... the boy's actions cannot be considered ...squeamish or effeminate, he really is in danger'. (Leonard J. Slatkes, 'Caravaggio's Boy Bitten by a Lizard,' *Print Review* 5 [1976], 149). A part-book in another genre work is 'conspicuously marked "Bassus", which might 'clarify the sex of the androgynous youth' (H. Colin Slim, 'Musical Inscriptions in Paintings by Caravaggio and His Followers' in *Music and Context: Essays for John Ward* [Cambridge, 1985], 244). In reply, Posner notes that green Italian lizards did not bite; this lizard then, confronts the boy with 'not death but the painful experience of rejection in love' (Donald Posner, 'Lizards and Lizard Lore' in *Art the Ape of Nature*, ed. M. Barasch and L.F. Sandler [New York, 1981], 389–90).

¹⁰ Giorgio Bonsanti, *Caravaggio* trans. P. Blanchard [Florence, 1984], 6. Caravaggio's earliest surviving work shows 'the disillusioning surprises which life has in store for inexperienced youth' (Benedict Nicolson, *The International Caravaggesque Movement* [Oxford, 1979], 34).

¹¹ Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 44.

the Virgin refers 'to the clothing of cardinals ... the color of triumph and resurrection.' 'Everything in Caravaggio is hieroglyph, emblem, symbol'; the paintings offer 'a vision of the world as rebus to be deciphered.'¹² Today this seems an extravagant account, but thirty-five years ago, Posner's text would have seemed as eccentric. Once we acknowledge that standards of interpretation change with the times, it is difficult to offer a convincing noncircular standard by which to judge interpretations.

Attributions

Just as allegorical interpretations change our view of Caravaggio's early genre works, so new attributions cause us to revise our vision of his entire development. If those early paintings differ radically from his mature works, how can we define the unity of his oeuvre? 'Could anyone have thought of ascribing the Uffizi *Bacchus* to the Master of the Naples *Works of Mercy*?' 'If we had only his earliest and latest pictures, it would be almost absurd to maintain that they were by the same hand.'¹³ The recently rediscovered *Jupiter, Neptune and Pluto*, though mentioned by Bellori, does not fit into Hibbard's story of the young painter of genre works who was out of place in the world of large-scale Roman artworks. Not surprisingly, Hibbard questions the attribution of this work, which another authority describes as 'Caravaggio's most important youthful work, both for its dimensions and its invention.'¹⁴ Controversial attributions involve an unavoidably circular argument – an artwriter's general view of the artist determining what works are attributed to him and those attributions, in turn, determining the writer's image of him.¹⁵

It is difficult to study Caravaggio without adopting some view, however tentative, about his career. When Hibbard rejects one widely accepted attribution, *The Conversion of the Magdalen*, claiming that 'standing before the painting, I have the immediate and intense feeling that ... it is not by Caravaggio,' his connoisseur's response is conditioned by his general view of the artist's life. One of the seemingly least plausible recent attributions, *The Tooth-Extractor*, is dismissed quickly by him as 'an animated genre scene that is wholly unlike any of Caravaggio's known works.'¹⁶ Still, it is akin to unquestionably genuine Caravaggios: the old woman is like the corresponding figure in *The Crucifixion of Saint Andrew*; the bald man's head 'reveals the circular brushstroke that Caravaggio characteristically used to define the point of maximum illumination'; the half-shadows occur in some faces in Caravaggio's Sicilian works; and the hands are typical.¹⁷

¹² Maurizio Calvesi, 'Caravaggio o la ricerca della salvezza,' *Storia dell' arte* 9, 10 [1971], 110, 116, 120, 120 n, 105, 133, 139.

¹³ Denis Mahon, 'On Some Aspects of Caravaggio and His Times,' *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 12 (1953): 42; Rudolf Wittkower, *Art and Architecture in Italy 1500–1750* (Harmondsworth, 1974), 42

¹⁴ Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 337; Mina Gregori et al., *The Age of Caravaggio* (New York, 1985), 232. A historian who accepts the attribution makes a conciliatory suggestion: perhaps the daring effects, 'not unexpected in a showpiece by a cocky young artist,' show that Caravaggio got help with the perspective (Alfred Moir, *Caravaggio* [New York, 1982], 86).

¹⁵ The assumption that Caravaggio acted in character when making his works is worth questioning. In daily life, nobody is absolutely consistent, so why expect such consistency in an artist's work? For discussion, see my 'Art without Its Artists?' *British Journal of Aesthetics* 22 (1982): 233–44. Bonsanti makes this point about Caravaggio: archival discoveries 'should serve as a warning to those scholars who feel they know how to distinguish ... the smallest inflection of style ... The path of an artist's career is not always straight' (Bonsanti, *Caravaggio*, 31).

¹⁶ Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 288, 342.

¹⁷ Gregori et al., *Age*, 342–44.

What is perhaps most disconcerting about *The Tooth-Extractor* is that it would mark a return at the end of Caravaggio's life to the creation of genre works. But if Annibale Carracci could switch between monumental works and genre paintings, why could not Caravaggio do the same?¹⁸ One commentator perversely argues that this late genre work 'feels truer to Caravaggio than most of his other pictures. This time he shows the horror straight; he doesn't filter it through the screen of a Biblical or mythological story.'¹⁹ This seems a strange view of a painter best known for his sacred works. But even Walter Friedlaender's classic 1955 account of Caravaggio depends upon a list of attributions that today most connoisseurs would find far too restrictive.²⁰

Just as Piero's iconography began to be intensively discussed only when he became famous, so too only when Caravaggio attributions come to be systematically studied in this way do we find highly complex theories of the artist's development. Wittkower asserts that 'Caravaggio's activity may conveniently be divided into four different phases'; Friedlaender argues that there is a real break between the 'youthful, bohemian canvases' and Caravaggio's 'monuments of devotion'; Hibbard replies that *The Calling of Saint Matthew* seems to have deliberately quoted from these popular early works'; and Luigi Salerno writes of his 'impression ... of the extreme coherence of the artist's development.'²¹

Mahon, interested 'in the growth of the artistic personality,' identifies *Saint Francis in Ecstasy* as 'a tentative, experimental work by a young artist who is not yet sure of himself,' and describes Caravaggio as searching for, finding, and then developing a style.²² This is a very natural way of thinking. The one undeniably authentic still life may seem out of place in Caravaggio's oeuvre, but fruit reappears on the table in *The Supper at Emmaus*, and if *Still Life* shows 'Saint Philip Neri's veneration of the humble,' then this painting can be linked with Caravaggio's development.²³

Suppose we imagine that Caravaggio did paint the Madrid *David with the Head of Goliath*. That 'entails believing that Caravaggio managed to find ... a peace entirely absent from the rest of his life ... it endows the quietude of ... *David with the Head of Goliath* with the extraordinary power of serving as a counterweight to the violence ... that fills the rest of Caravaggio's oeuvre.'²⁴ If we believe that an artist's oeuvre has a unity, our view of Caravaggio's entire career will be changed by accepting this one attribution. Caravaggio's altarpieces may seem radically different from his early 'homoerotic' works. But just as his boys proposition the viewer, so perhaps his *Entombment* 'uses the directed glance and the

¹⁸ See the discussion in *The Age of Correggio and the Carracci* (Washington, D.C., 1986). Perhaps because Annibale's personality has attracted less interest than Caravaggio's, Carracci attributions are not linked in the same way to the artist's life.

¹⁹ Sanford Schwartz, 'The Art World,' *New Yorker*, 2 September 1985, 198.

²⁰ In part, these problems of attribution arise because although Caravaggio's contemporaries valued his works highly, none of them provided a *catalogue raisonné*, and once Caravaggio's art fell into disfavor, many works were no longer accurately attributed. So, after Longhi's 1951 exhibition reestablished Caravaggio's fame, much research has been devoted to locating works known only from copies or from written descriptions.

²¹ Wittkower, *Art*, 45; Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies*, ix; Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 97; Luigi Salerno, 'The Art-Historical Implications of the Detroit 'Magdalene',' *Art Bulletin* 116 (1974): 587.

²² Denis Mahon, 'Contrasts in Art-Historical Method: Two Recent Approaches to Caravaggio,' *Burlington Magazine* 95 (1953): 214 n.11; Denis Mahon, 'Addenda to Caravaggio,' *Burlington Magazine* 94 (1952): 7.

²³ Moir, *Caravaggio*, 100.

²⁴ Carter Ratcliff, 'On Two Dubious Caravaggios,' *Art in America* 73 (1985): 142.

offering gestures to force the spectator to assume a ... role, ... assistant in the grave.²⁵

Given this belief in the ultimate unity of Caravaggio's work, individual works that do not fall into the pattern require explanation. Because he believes that Caravaggio was a follower of Saint Philip Neri, Moir thinks that *Ecce Homo* shows Christ 'shamed not for Himself but for man's incapacity for humanity.' The *Madonna and Child with Saint Anne*, painted the next year, was, by contrast, an unappealing commission', a Counter-Reformation document ... directed against Protestant denial of the Immaculate Conception' that Caravaggio sought, vainly, to translate 'into human terms.' Immediately afterward, in his *Death of the Virgin*, 'Caravaggio, freed from the burden of doctrine, presented an ordinary mortal death.'²⁶ Hibbard implicitly rejects this account, finding *Ecce Homo* 'a disagreeable painting that could not be from the master's hand,' and the *Madonna and Child with Saint Anne* heterodox in accentuating Christ's nudity 'to the point of offense' and relegating Saint Anne to 'the side as an observing old crone.'²⁷ Each view of Caravaggio's development influences judgments about attributions.²⁸

Contemporary Commentary

All modern historians are guided by the remarks of Caravaggio's contemporaries. But like Vasari's comments on Piero, those remarks require interpretation. Bellori's brief comment on the works in the Cerasi Chapel seems simple: 'The story is entirely without action.'²⁹ For Friedlaender, Bellori is quite correct from the baroque point of view, which identifies action with movement. Here it happens that 'existence and not action reveals the essence of art.'³⁰ Mahon, too, notes that 'in a subject which by tradition was one of the standard vehicles for vigorous action Caravaggio eschews any but the gentlest movements.' 'The genre picture is the opposite of the history painting; as in Aristotle's categories, one is drama or tragedy, and the other comedy... . Bellori ... knows perfectly that this picture is not a genre work and yet cannot be assimilated to tragedy.'³¹ Maybe Bellori's words mean the opposite of what they literally say: 'In modern terms, they signify exactly the

²⁵ Georgia Wright, 'Caravaggio's Entombment Considered in Situ,' *Art Bulletin* 55 (1978): 41.

²⁶ Moir, *Caravaggio*, 122, 126, 128.

²⁷ Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 198, 358.

²⁸ 'All of the elements of [Caravaggio's] art come together' in *David with the Head of Goliath*, an impression 'heightened by [the painting's] position in the [Age of Caravaggio] exhibition ... on the far wall of the final gallery' (Arthur Danto, 'Art,' *The Nation*, 2 March 1985, 252). One can predict a book's view of Caravaggio by the work the author chooses for the dust jacket: S. J. Freedberg picks *Saint John the Baptist*, emphasizing Caravaggio's relation to Michelangelo; Longhi, a detail from *The Calling of Saint Matthew*, emphasizing Caravaggio's place in the mainstream tradition of monumental Italian painting; Röttgen, a detail from that work, a self-portrait important for his psychoanalytic study; Friedlaender, the head of Goliath, underlining his concern with Caravaggio and religion; and Hibbard, the *Entombment*, the least radical major Caravaggio, reflecting his doubts about the artist's status.

²⁹ Quoted in Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies*, 249.

³⁰ Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies*, 9; Lionello Venturi, *Il Caravaggio* (Novara, 1952), 23.

³¹ Denis Mahon, 'Egregius in Urbe Pictor: Caravaggio Revisited,' *Burlington Magazine* 106 (1964), 230; Giulio Carlo Argan, 'Il "Realismo" nella poetica del Caravaggio,' in *Scritti di storia dell'arte in onore de Lionello Venturi*, 2 (1956), 30–31.

opposite: action without historical significance, that is mere happenings.³²

But are these words worth so much analysis? Bellori was 'not born until five years after Caravaggio's death ... and did not approve of Caravaggio's style.'³³ Maybe it was not within the realm of an artwriter of the seventeenth century to understand Caravaggio's realism. Because any early commentary on Caravaggio seems precious, we read with great care words that, since they do not reflect close study of his art, perhaps were not meant to be taken so seriously.

Of the Contarelli Chapel Caravaggios, Zuccaro said: 'What is all the fuss about? ... I don't see anything here but the thought of Giorgione.'³⁴ As Giorgione was then poorly understood in Rome – Bellori, who reports the story, had 'no first-hand knowledge' of Giorgione's paintings – and Zuccaro was successful but insecure, these words may be merely an ignorant expression of resentment.³⁵ But possibly Zuccaro did not see something important. He might be thinking not of Giorgione, but of Caravaggio's use of 'overly naturalistic light,' or he could be saying: 'See what happens when Caravaggio has to tackle a large public *storia* ... He simply enlarges one of those genre scenes which some of the more irresponsible *dilettanti* have found curious.'³⁶

Hibbard notes that Caravaggio's early works appeared 'Giorgionesque in subject' and so 'poetic in the eyes of ... contemporaries.'³⁷ Maybe Zuccaro is complaining that Caravaggio, like the Venetians, composed directly on canvas without first making a drawing. The role of drawing in Caravaggio's art has been the subject of considerable debate. Some historians believe that Caravaggio's failure to draw affects his compositions: 'the mere working mechanics of pictorial representation in the High Renaissance sense never became an open book for Caravaggio'; 'by masking awkward junctures and gaps with darkness, Caravaggio would disguise his limitations as painter of traditional Renaissance scenes in perspective.'³⁸ Drawing allows an artist to work out the composition of a painting before turning to the full-scale picture, and this Caravaggio refuses to do. X-rays of *The Martyrdom of Saint Matthew* show an altogether different composition underneath.³⁹ But in the later *Beheading of Saint John the Baptist* there are only 'insignificant changes in an ear and fabric design,' so perhaps Caravaggio needed to rework the earlier picture only because it was his first large-scale composition.⁴⁰

How we interpret these comments of Bellori and Zuccaro depends upon our view of Caravaggio's goals. Although such contemporary commentary can aid in the interpretation of his art, it cannot

³² Other modern artwriters also offer sympathetic interpretations of Bellori's words: Caravaggio gives a 'synthesis of action, as was already done by the early quattrocento Florentines'; he combines 'attention to imitation ... with a suspension of narrative action' (Marangoni, quoted in Berne Joffroy, *Le dossier Caravage* [Paris 1969], 173; see also Svetlana Alpers, 'Describe or Narrate? A Problem in Realistic Representation,' *New Literary History* 8 (1976): 15).

³³ Alfred Moir, 'Did Caravaggio Draw?' *Art Quarterly* 32 (1969), 369 n.6.

³⁴ Quoted in Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies*, 235.

³⁵ Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 6, n.9

³⁶ Mahon 'Egregius,' 231. See also Charles Dempsey, *Annibale Carracci and the Beginnings of Baroque Style* (Gluckstadt, 1977), 23; and Valerio Mariani, 'Caravaggio,' in *Encyclopedia of World Art* (London, 1960), 3: 75.

³⁷ Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 87.

³⁸ Mahon, 'Some Aspects,' 42–43; Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 96.

³⁹ Mahon, 'Some Aspects,' 40.

⁴⁰ Richard E. Spear, 'Stocktaking in Caravaggio Studies,' *Burlington Magazine* 126 (1984): 165.

unambiguously support any one view of his work. As Bellori's and Zuccaro's comments are brief and hostile, a modern artwriter might dismiss them; historians who do find them valuable must interpret them.⁴¹

Cultural History

One way to understand Caravaggio's art is to place it within the broader context of his culture, in which new scientific and religious movements were important. Because both Caravaggio and Galileo were linked to del Monte's circle, commentators have often sought to connect their work. Among artists, Caravaggio 'was alone in positioning himself on the side of the new men of science, rejecting tradition and basing his work on nature alone.'⁴² The camera obscura perhaps gave Caravaggio ideas about how to use light.⁴³ But as Caravaggio's 'interest in the visual world was small' – he never painted an independent landscape and probably did 'without models in his later years' – these parallels seem unhelpful.⁴⁴ Such attempts to link Caravaggio, who had no known intellectual interests, and Galileo are based not upon detailed discussion of visual details but upon an easily questioned Hegelian belief in the ultimate unity of seicento culture.

Because Caravaggio painted many sacred works, it is easier to relate his art to contemporary religious movements. There is a tradition that emphasizes his heterodoxy. Among those who painted the death of the Virgin, 'only Caravaggio had the courage or the cynicism, to show her not as dying to this world, but as dead in this world.' 'One cannot help feeling that for Caravaggio heaven did not exist: there was only the earth below. Occasionally an angel might come down to man, but man was never caught up to the angels.'⁴⁵ Perhaps he had 'the character of a protestant, not only in art directed against the artificial culture of his time, but in his return to a humane base, to directly observed reality.'⁴⁶

John Berger's highly personal essay develops these ideas. Caravaggio was 'the first painter of life as experienced by the popolaccia.... He does

⁴¹ Nor do these problems arise here just because Bellori and Zuccaro are historically distant figures. I have written about the work of several now well-known painters, who have discussed their work with me at length (see my 'Color in the Recent Work,' in *Sean Scully* [Pittsburgh, 1985], 22–27, and 'Artifice and Artificiality: David Reed's Recent Paintings,' *Arts Magazine* 60 [1986] 30–33). Sometimes they have rejected my interpretations, but at other times they have given me ideas, or accepted my views and repeated them to other artwriters. What this shows is not that I have discovered their intentions, but that interpretations can be the product of such a dialogue.

⁴² Venturi, *Caravaggio*, 4. See also Roberto Longhi, *Caravaggio* (Rome, 1972), ii, and Luigi Salerno in Gregori et al., *Age*, 19.

⁴³ See the discussion in Mahon, 'Contrasts,' 216, and Mario Praz, *On Neoclassicism*, trans. A. Davidson (Evanston, 1969), 28.

⁴⁴ Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 84–85. Compare Panofsky's interesting claim that the moon in Lodovico Cigoli's *Assumption of the Virgin* in the church of Santa Maria in Rome represents 'the moon under the Virgin's feet exactly as it had revealed itself to Galileo's telescope' (Erwin Panofsky, *Galileo as a Critic of the Arts* [The Hague, 1954], 5). See also Luigi Salerno, 'Caravaggio e la cultura nel suo tempo,' in *Novità sul Caravaggio: Saggi e contributi*, ed. M. Cinotti (Milan, 1975), 22.

⁴⁵ Roger Hinks, *Caravaggio's Death of the Virgin* (Oxford, 1953), 13; Roger Hinks, *Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio* (London, 1953), 88.

⁴⁶ Mario Praz, *Il giardino dei sensi* (Turin, 1975), 272.

not depict the underworld for others; his vision is one that he shares with it.... He was a heretical painter: his works were rejected or criticized by the Church because of their subject matter.... His heresy consisted of transporting religious themes into popular tragedies.' In this art, 'as you would expect, there is no property.'⁴⁷ But Caravaggio was born into the gentry and, after a few years in poverty, lived as a young man in del Monte's great house. He quickly achieved financial success. If he was at home in the lower depths, he did not remain there when he could escape.

Without making Caravaggio a radical, Friedlaender emphasizes his possible connection with Saint Philip Neri, a charismatic reformer. 'Caravaggio's later works cannot be fully understood without understanding Filippo's principles' and his concern for the people: 'Such an extraordinary personality ... could hardly have escaped the attention of the young Caravaggio ... if they liked, Caravaggio and his young friends could have had easy access to the part of the Oratory in which Filippo lived.... One can imagine the young friends of Caravaggio ... had participated in the singing of ... motets and madrigals.'⁴⁸ Is this the same man the seicento writers describe, the man who, 'after having painted for a few hours ... used to go out on the town with a sword at his side,' who lived with 'swaggering, hearty fellows' whose motto was without hope, without fear'? Perhaps, like a Graham Greene hero, he sought salvation because he felt he was a sinner.⁴⁹

Friedlaender admits that there is 'nothing in [Neri's] preserved sermons, letters or notes which could have given Caravaggio a basic idea for the composition of any one of his paintings.'⁵⁰ But we do have records of contemporary responses to two of Caravaggio's paintings. The *Madonna di Loreto*, Baglione wrote, shows two pilgrims, 'one with muddy feet and the other wearing a soiled and torn cap'; and *The Death of the Virgin*, Hibbard says, 'not only flaunted decorum but also decried the spiritual content of the scene.'⁵¹ Is this evidence that Caravaggio was a crypto-Protestant, or even religiously indifferent? When Pierre Francastel asserted in 1938 that Caravaggio was 'the last representative of the grand tradition of faith,' he made a point now supported by a number of accounts.⁵² Removing one's shoes in a holy place, as do the pilgrims in the *Madonna di Loreto*, was an ancient custom; the painter's depiction of barefoot pilgrims 'ought not to have offended an Order such as the

⁴⁷ John Berger, 'Caravaggio, or the One Shelter,' *Village Voice*, 14 December 1982, 67–69. This popular account echoes ideas presented earlier by art historians. 'It is probable that ... the poverty of his earlier years ... caused him to rebel against convention and gave him a sharp awareness of the spiritual needs of the individual, whatever his social rank' (Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies*, 129); 'Caravaggio appears to believe that it is only for those who have nothing in this world that Christ has come' (Emile Mâle, *L'art religieux après le concile de Trente* [Paris, 1932], 7).

⁴⁸ Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies*, 123, 124–26. The quotations that follow appear on pp.250 and 265.

⁴⁹ We like to think that even bad-tempered geniuses hold admirable views, and so we believe that when Giordano Bruno was burnt at the stake, 'Caravaggio must have recognized the inhumanity of this method of coping with dissent'; we may imagine his 'identification with the suffering of the victim' (Moir, *Caravaggio*, 122; Mina Gregori in Gregori et al., *Age*, 256). But no record supports these claims.

⁵⁰ This conclusion is supported by recent investigations of the iconography of the Entombment commissioned for Neri's church and rejected by the patrons (Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies*, 126; Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 313; Mary Anne Graeve, 'The Stone of Unction in Caravaggio's Painting for the Chiesa Nuova,' *Art Bulletin* 40 (1958): 234; Wright, 'Entombment,' 38–39).

⁵¹ Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 204; Baglione is quoted in Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies*, 235.

⁵² Pierre Francastel, 'Le réalisme de Caravage,' *Gazette des beaux-arts*, 6th ser. 20 (1938): 62; Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 188.

Barefoot Carmelites and, indeed, was probably intended as a tribute to their particular way of life.⁵³ Caravaggio's dead Virgin may show 'total authenticity, requiring that emotion wear the look and carry the behavior of the ordinary world as different as possible from the styled world of art.'⁵⁴

Homosexuality

'The nature of Caravaggio's sexual tastes can scarcely be questioned'; his early works show 'erotically appealing boys painted by an artist of homosexual inclinations.'⁵⁵ Only modern commentators make this claim. The first prominent suggestion of this idea, Berenson's three words of 1951 – 'perhaps a homosexual' – earned an indignant rebuke from Longhi, who appealed, unconvincingly, to evidence of Caravaggio's girlfriend.⁵⁶ The seicento commentators, who say much else about Caravaggio's nastiness, omit any mention of his sexuality, either because of ignorance or because they could not discuss it. Richard E. Spear asks the right question: 'If the homosexual aspects of so many of Caravaggio's pictures are dominant, why did they escape mention by any early commentator ...?'⁵⁷ *Amor Vincit Omnia* may look blatantly erotic, but as its owner, a 'rather conventionally religious' man, 'hung it in a place of honour,' presumably it did not seem an offensive work.⁵⁸

Apart from the pictures themselves, the documentary evidence about Caravaggio's sexuality is scanty.⁵⁹ Drawing on Sussino's account, a modern imaginative writer claims that Caravaggio was expelled from Syracuse 'for having been caught staring too intently at a group of boys.... Celebrimi pittore, hell; the town fathers knew what it was all about.'⁶⁰ But this too is speculation. What the unreliable Sussino actually says is that Caravaggio was annoyed by the boys' teacher and wounded the man. Lacking models, perhaps he did only want to sketch the boys.

Because the documentary evidence is so incomplete, Caravaggio's homosexuality is often deduced from his pictures. Certainly *Boy with a Basket of Fruit* 'looks out at the observer with a velvety gaze, his lips parted in an inviting manner.'⁶¹ But such eye-catching effects were a commonplace Renaissance device, recommended by Alberti. The pretty boy in Caravaggio's portrait of the grand master of the Knights of Malta also catches our eye, and here again we find the motif that interested Hibbard, a young boy with an older, balding man. But this juxtaposition

⁵³ "Being-in-the-world' ... gets the name 'homo' in relation to that of which it consists (*humus*)' (Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson [New York, 1962], 243; see also Gash, *Caravaggio*, 104).

⁵⁴ S. J. Freedberg, *Circa 1600: A Revolution of Style in Italian Painting* (Cambridge, 1983), 66–68; Longhi, *Caravaggio*, 40.

⁵⁵ Posner, 'Homoerotic Early Works,' 302; Michael Kitson, *The Complete Paintings of Caravaggio* (New York, 1967), 7.

⁵⁶ Bernard Berenson, *Caravaggio* (London 1953), 91; Roberto Longhi, 'Novelletta del Caravaggio "invertio"', *Paragone* 27 (1952): 62. What seems surprising about Longhi's response is the presumption that a man who had a girlfriend could not also have boyfriends.

⁵⁷ Spear, 'Stocktaking,' 165.

⁵⁸ Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 160.

⁵⁹ One historian describes an evening at Cardinal Del Monte's house, where, 'as there were no ladies present, the dancing was done by boys dressed up as girls'; another says that this report comes from a 'tendentious and not very reliable source' (Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 247 n.7; Francis Haskell, *Patrons and Painters* [New Haven, 1980]; Gregori, in Gregori et al., *Age*, 229).

⁶⁰ Stephen Koch, 'Caravaggio and the Unseen,' *Antaeus* 54 (1985): 99.

⁶¹ Bonsanti, *Caravaggio*, 6.

was presumably determined entirely by the commission, and surely the grand master would not have commissioned an erotic portrait.

S. J. Freedberg offers a sophisticated reading of Caravaggio's sexuality. Contrasting Caravaggio's *Saint John* with Bronzino's, he finds that 'Caravaggio's apprehension of the model's presence *seems* unimpeded in the least degree by any intervention of the intellect or by those conventions of aesthetic or of ethic that the intellect invents.'⁶² Even a photograph, however, is a product of conventions. Since Freedberg also argues that the work is 'a deliberate translation into realist prose' of Michelangelo's *Ignudo*, as the word 'seems' hints, he is claiming not that Caravaggio shows his model directly, but that his images seem direct when compared with those of the mannerists. The art/reality distinction here identifies two distinct kinds of artistic representations. Unlike Berger, Freedberg draws on a generally accepted fact: Caravaggio's *Saint John* does quote Michelangelo. But there is disagreement about the meaning of that quotation. For Friedlaender the painting involves 'derisive irony and in a sense a blasphemy.'⁶³ Perhaps, however, 'Caravaggio grasped the central theme of Michelangelo's monumental works ... but replaced the emphasis on physical description by one of psychological penetration.'⁶⁴

In an elaborate Freudian analysis, Röttgen speculates that because Caravaggio's mother was incapable of affection, his prolonged puberty and social isolation left him unable to feel social reciprocity. Since the known facts are few, Röttgen takes the 'pictures [as] documents of the actual psychic situation.' *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist* shows 'a grave conflict between the ego and the superego in those years which troubled the artist's mind'; Caravaggio's Lazarus is a 'symbol of a man bound to God by death'; and 'the identification of the artist with the beheaded saint reveals the tendency to renunciation and simultaneously illustrates the death instinct, the destructiveness turned against himself.'⁶⁵ For Röttgen, Caravaggio's pictures are unmediated images of the artist's mental states: a single figure reveals his self-image; two figures reveal his inner conflict, as when he is said to identify with both David and Goliath in his picture of them. This complex theory thus rests on an easily contested interpretation of the pictures.

Naturalism/Realism

Although the seicento commentators have nothing to say about Caravaggio's sexuality, they obsessively describe his naturalism:

[His] mere copying does not seem ... to be satisfactory, since it is impossible to put in one room a multitude of people acting out the story. (Mancini)

⁶² Freedberg, *Circa* 1600, 53 (italics added).

⁶³ Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies*, 59.

⁶⁴ Stephen D. Pepper, 'Caravaggio and Guido Reni: Contrasts in Attitudes,' *Art Quarterly* 24 (1971): 343. Perhaps Caravaggio's ambivalence about his homosexual namesake was important; but since another precedent for this picture was a famous Leonardoesque *Saint John*, he might not have been thinking only of Michelangelo (Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 154; Friedländer, *Caravaggio Studies*, 91; on Caravaggio's name, see Maurizio Calvesi, 'La realtà de Caravaggio Prima parte (Vicende),' *Storia dell'arte* 53 (1985): 62). Hibbard supports his account of Caravaggio's homosexuality by describing the artist's only female nude, the figure of Charity in *Seven Works of Mercy*, as 'unhappy with her chore ... we can only imagine ... a groan from her coarse lips.' But here he contradicts his earlier claim that Caravaggio's *Judith* is 'sexual and attractive' (Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 67, 106).

⁶⁵ Herwarth Röttgen, *Il Caravaggio Ricerche e interpretazioni* (Rome, 1974), 189, 209, 219, 221. Similar conceptual problems appear in the most elaborate attempt to provide a social history of Caravaggio's art, Françoise Bardou's *Caravage ou l'expérience de la matière* (Paris, 1978).

His beautiful style ... consisted of painting from nature.... he did not have much judgement in selecting the good and avoiding the bad. (Baglione)

He ... paint[ed] from nature... rising from imitations of flowers and fruits ... finally ... painting complete figures. (Scannelli)

He claimed ... he never made a single brushstroke that he called his own, but said rather that it was nature's. (Bellori)

This man ... did not know how to make anything without the actual model before his eyes. (Scaramuccia)

He despised anything that was not done from life. (Sandrart)

His low regard for ancient sculpture kept him from being anything more than a mere naturalist. (Sussino)⁶⁶

As these remarks are literally untrue, perhaps these commentators, like Freedberg, mean to contrast Caravaggio with the idealizing mannerists.⁶⁷

The naturalism of Caravaggio's pictures makes them inherently ambiguous. Michelangelo's *Conversion of Saint Paul* shows Christ above the saint. Caravaggio depicts only a light whose source is not present. Is he thus carrying 'realism to extremes for the sake of bringing the miraculous as close to earth as possible'? Is he 'translating visions into pictorial language,' or is he a secular artist?⁶⁸ Does his *Stigmatization of Saint Francis* show a fainted monk supported by a pretty boy, or a vision?⁶⁹ Hibbard finds *The Rest on the Flight into Egypt* 'one of the most charming works of Caravaggio's youth despite the erotic angel.'⁷⁰ Arthur Danto sees 'an image which connects the religious vocation and erotic preference which co-exist harmoniously.' Perhaps Caravaggio's distortions 'were not accidental but quite intentional..., intended to shock the viewer out of interpreting the paintings as simple transcriptions of visual reality.'⁷¹

There is a tradition of hostile commentary on the naturalism of *The Conversion of Saint Paul*. Burckhardt writes that 'the horse nearly fills the whole of the picture.' Fry says that '[Caravaggio] has made a very finished representation from nature of a horse in a stable with a man holding its head.' And Berenson says: 'We are to interpret this charade as the conversion of Paul. Nothing more incongruous than the importance given to horse over rider.'⁷² Two early commentators, however, see a

⁶⁶ Quoted in Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 350, 356, 357, 376, 387.

⁶⁷ See Heinrich Wölfflin, *Classical Art*, trans. P. and L. Murray (Oxford 1968), 203–4, which offers a surprisingly positive early judgment of Caravaggio. 'Naturalism' names what Caravaggio's contemporaries find unfamiliar, and so disturbing; we see Caravaggio's images differently just as we find early films, which once apparently seemed so lifelike, old-fashioned looking. A long tradition of commentary links Caravaggio with Courbet: 'Modern naturalism ... begins in all its crudity' with Caravaggio (Burckhardt quoted in Joffroy, *Le dossier*, ii). 'The social character of realism was at the origin of the polemics against Courbet, a distant heir of Caravaggio' (Lionello Venturi *Four Steps towards Modern Art* [New York 1956], 24).

⁶⁸ Walter Friedlaender, *Mannerism and Anti-Mannerism in Italian Painting*, trans. J. Costello et al., (New York 1965), 68; Wittkower, *Art* 55–56.

⁶⁹ Gash, *Caravaggio*, 40; Moir, *Caravaggio*, 76.

⁷⁰ Hibbard *Caravaggio*, 55.

⁷¹ Danto, *Art*, 251; Bruni Cappelli, 'Realism and Reality in the Art of Caravaggio,' a wonderfully titled paper that exists alas, only in a novel by Oliver Banks. *The Caravaggio Obsession* (New York 1984), 179. How we understand Caravaggio's naturalism determines even how we identify his subjects. To Hibbard, *Sleeping Cupid* 'looks like a dead baby,' but according to Gash it may be a reminder of the Maltese Knight's 'vow of chastity,' signifying 'the abandonment of worldly pleasures.' (Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 262. Gash, *Caravaggio*, 120).

⁷² Jacob Burckhardt, *The Cicerone*, trans. A. H. Clough (London 1873); Roger Fry, *Transformations* (Garden City, N.Y., 1956), 158; Berenson, *Caravaggio*, 20. Burckhardt wrote his critique 'in the same year in which Courbet opened the pavillion of his realism in the Universal Exposition' (Robert Longhi, *Mostra del Caravaggio* [Florence, 1951]). For an interesting nineteenth-century account, see Anna Jameson, *Sacred and Legendary Art* (Boston, 1900).

sacred scene: 'the beast, the fallen man were sharply illuminated ... they were alone in the darkness, a universe in themselves'; 'this is one of those happy cases where one sees nothing but the truth.'⁷³

Naturalistic images of inner visions may not always be inherently ambiguous. Visual evidence within the pictures can disambiguate such images. Perhaps *The Conversion of the Magdalen* represents that event as an 'inner transformation.' 'When the mirror points outward to the observer ... the figure stands as an emblem.' Here, since the figure of Mary Magdalene 'faces into the painting,' we see a representation of her inner awareness.⁷⁴ Traditional versions of *The Supper at Emmaus* make the apostles seem a little foolish; how can they fail to recognize Christ? 'By revealing an unexpected Christ – one who does not look like himself – Caravaggio was the first painter to justify the disciples' lack of recognition We look in vain for the nail prints or the side wound.'⁷⁵

Playacting

Just as the seicento writers call Caravaggio a mere naturalist, so they say that his figures playact. Bellori writes: 'He painted a young girl seated on a chair with her hands in her lap in the act of drying her hair ... he would have us believe that she is the Magdalene.'⁷⁶ But whereas nobody today accepts the idea that Caravaggio is a simple naturalist, many historians agree that his figures playact.

Does Judith really saw through the gaping neck of Holofernes? Certainly she does not. She merely holds the sword with such resolution as the model can muster. (Gowing)

The good-looking young woman named Catherine perhaps looks as if posing for her portrait. (Berenson)

His figures are merely going through the motions of movement. (Mahon)

He is theatrical, but his drama does not convince ... the action seems to evaporate into a sort of charade. (Hinks)⁷⁷

In Caravaggio's time, however, playacting was not inconsistent with seriousness. A 'growing sense of the reality of the stage seems to have converged with a growing sense of the illusoriness of reality, to produce a paradoxical equation of the two ... in its most encompassing form ...

⁷³ Aldous Huxley, *Crome Yellow* (New York, 1925), 111–12; Maragoni, quoted in Joffroy, *Le dossier*, 164.

⁷⁴ Fredrick Cummings, 'The Meaning of Caravaggio's 'Conversion of Magdalen'', *Burlington Magazine* 116 (1974): 557–58.

⁷⁵ Charles Scribner III, 'In Alia Effigie: Caravaggio's London *Supper at Emmaus*,' *Art Bulletin* 59 (1977): 378–79. Analogously, the first *Inspiration of Saint Matthew* has been called a 'popularized conception of St Matthew as a simple scribe' (Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies*, 97, 127). But since Saint Matthew is writing in Hebrew 'the book of generations,' this image may be an anti-Protestant polemic, documenting 'the authenticity of the Hebrew Gospel as a source of the Vulgate' (Irving Lavin, 'Divine Inspiration in Caravaggio's two St Matthews,' *Art Bulletin* 56 [1974]: 59–81: supplementary note in *Art Bulletin* 61 [1980]: 113–14; see also Troy Thomas, 'Expressive Aspects of Caravaggio's First *Inspiration of Saint Matthew*,' *Art Bulletin* 67 [1985]: 637–52).

⁷⁶ Quoted in Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies*, 246.

⁷⁷ Lawrence Gowing, 'Incongruities of the Actual,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 23 March 1984, 313; Berenson, *Caravaggio*, 14; Mahon, 'Egregius,' 229; Hinks, *Caravaggio*, 58.

theater of the world, whose “producer” is God.’⁷⁸ Playacting emphasizes an ambiguity inherent in baroque painting, in which sacred scenes summoned up ‘visions of the heroic defenders of the early Church while reminding Christians that dying for the faith was a contemporary reality.’⁷⁹ Caravaggio’s self-portraits present him in the historically distant scene. But what is the meaning of those self-portraits? The early pictures show him reflected in a mirror because he was too poor to afford models.⁸⁰ But when Caravaggio depicts himself looking back in flight in *The Martyrdom of Saint Matthew* or ‘repeatedly introduce[s] self-portraits in paintings with tragic themes,’ is he expressing guilt or just ‘underscor[ing] the realism of the scene’?⁸¹

Public Response

It is not easy to know how Caravaggio’s art was understood in his time. Nowadays nobody would be satisfied with Arnold Hauser’s idea that Caravaggio’s ‘bold, unvarnished naturalism was unable to satisfy the taste of his high ecclesiastical patrons,’ or with Lionello Venturi’s fantastic suggestion that ‘the difficulties he encountered ... embittered him and eventually unbalanced his mind.’⁸² ‘Da popolani ne fu fatto estreme schiamazzo’ when they saw the *Madonna di Loreto*, which may mean that ‘the simple people who were portrayed ... saw it and approved.’⁸³ *The Death of the Virgin* was highly praised by painters, and Rubens arranged for its sale to the duke of Mantua, whose agent ‘writes that he bows to the taste of the majority; but he confesses that the ignorant like himself might sigh for a few of those graces of style that charm the eye, and admits frankly that for his part the attractions of Caravaggio’s work remain somewhat dubious.’⁸⁴

Wittkower offers a plausible generalization: ‘Caravaggio’s opponents ... were mainly recruited from the lower clergy and the mass of people ... Only the cognoscenti were able to see these pictures as works of art.’⁸⁵ But as documentation is lacking, we cannot really know whether the figures in the *Madonna di Loreto* were ‘presented as a naïve worshiper might imagine them’ or whether critics objected not to the pilgrims’

⁷⁸ Richard Bernheimer, ‘Theatrum Mundi,’ *Art Bulletin* 38 (1956): 231, 234. See also Irving Lavin, *Bernini and the Unity of the Visual Arts* (New York, 1980), and *Gianlorenzo Bernini: New Aspects of His Art and Thought*, ed. I. Lavin (University Park, Pa, 1985); Leo Steinberg, ‘Observations in the Cerasi Chapel,’ *Art Bulletin* 49 (1957): 189–90; Danto, ‘Art,’ 252.

⁷⁹ Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 104. ‘Caravaggio ... seems to want to impress the scene well in his mind, in order to paint it later’ (Bonsanti, *Caravaggio*, 36). Surely this is too literal-minded. But even Hibbard assumes that the portrait carries psychological significance. ‘We sense here a beginning of ... his identification with violence and evil’ (Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 108).

⁸⁰ Quoted in Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies*, 234; see also Erwin Panofsky, *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer* (Princeton, 1971), 16. When Pontormo shows himself helping Christ in *The Road to Calvary* (1523–24), that unprecedented self-portrait calls for no special interpretation; when Lomazono paints himself as a pagan deity, he presents the neo-Platonic idea that artists are gifted melancholics (S. J. Freedberg, *Painting in Italy 1500–1600* [Harmondsworth, 1970], 121; Gash, *Caravaggio*, 14; James B. Lynch, ‘Lomazzo’s Self-Portrait in the Brera,’ *Gazette des beaux-arts*, 6th ser. 199 [1964]: 196).

⁸¹ Mina Gregori in *Painting in Naples 1606–1705*, ed. C. Whitfield and J Martineau (New York, 1983); Gregori in Gregori et al., *Age*, 352.

⁸² Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art*, trans. A. Hauser and S. Godman (New York, 1960), 2, 184; Venturi, *Four Steps*, 29–30.

⁸³ Baglione, quoted in Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 190.

⁸⁴ Hinks, *Death of the Virgin*, 6.

⁸⁵ Wittkower, *Art*, 56.

muddy feet 'but instead to the absolute iconographic novelty of the painting.'⁸⁶

Medusa is most puzzling, for a picture of a woman who petrifies men is a strange wedding present.⁸⁷ Should we see here an image from Caravaggio's 'private world of fears and fantasies' or a figure who renders male viewers impotent?⁸⁸ A contemporary asserted that the recipient's true *Medusa* 'is his own valour,' and the work could be a recreation of a famous lost Leonardo described by Vasari. We know that it was not thought offensive. As it was placed in a *Wunderkammer*, perhaps it was not regarded as an artwork at all: 'The shield of the *Medusa* was considered more as a curiosity than as an artwork.'⁸⁹

Pictorial Quotation/Self-Expression

Studies of Caravaggio's pictorial quotations are mostly the product of modern scholars. Friedlaender, for example, claims that the horse in *The Conversion of Saint Paul* 'is taken directly from Dürer's engraving,' and Mina Gregori says that the body of Christ in *Christ Crowned with Thorns* is derived 'from the *Belevedere Torso*.'⁹⁰ As there are only a certain number of ways of depicting a horse seen from the back or a standing man, and we are unsure that Caravaggio saw the works that historians claim as influences on him, debates about quotations are typically open-ended. Perhaps *The Resurrection of Lazarus* quotes from D'Arpino, but the mere fact that Caravaggio spoke of D'Arpino with admiration at a trial gives relatively weak support to that claim. Similarly, even if a Giulio Romano engraving shows a visually similar figure, why would Caravaggio choose to quote it?⁹¹ Charles Scribner argues that *The Supper at Emmaus* quotes an early Christian sarcophagus, Marco d'Oggione's *Salvatore Mundi*, and the Christ in Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* but not, as another scholar claims, Michelangelo's *Bacchus*.⁹² As the seicento accounts support neither view, however, only debate among modern scholars can determine whether Scribner's interpretation is reasonable.

If there is any seemingly certain fact about Caravaggio, it is that he was a violent man, the records of whose court appearances have survived. 'As in his art, so in his private life he was singular and unapproachable, violently tempered and of gloomy mood, suffering, proud and from conflict deeply embittered.'⁹³ How could a man 'so very rebellious and uncontrolled in his private life ... [have] produced thoughtful and innovative paintings'?⁹⁴ But was he exceptionally rebellious? Perhaps 'there is little reason to proclaim Caravaggio an exceptionally violent and uninhibited artist.' Even the facts are unclear. Friedlaender's claim that his acts of violence all occurred when he was nearly thirty or older is

⁸⁶ Gash, *Caravaggio*, 90; Moir, *Caravaggio*, 120; Bonsanti, *Caravaggio*, 55.

⁸⁷ Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies*, 88.

⁸⁸ Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 90; Schneider, 'Donatello,' 85.

⁸⁹ Detlef Heikmap, 'La Medusa del Caravaggio e l'armatura delo Scia' 'Abbàs di Persia', *Paragone* 199 (1966): 68.

⁹⁰ Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies*, 19; Gregori in Gregori et al., *Age*, 288.

⁹¹ Richard E. Spear, 'The 'Raising of Lazarus': Caravaggio and the Sixteenth-Century Tradition.' *Gazette des beaux-arts*, 6th ser. 200 (1965): 65–66; Moir, *Caravaggio*, 156.

⁹² Scribner, 'In Alia Effigie,' 380–81.

⁹³ John Gash, 'American Baroque,' *Art History* 8 (1985): 253; Alois Riegl, *Die Entstehung der Barockkunst in Rom* (Vienna, 1923), 192. See also Wittkower, *Art*, 53–54; Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 85.

⁹⁴ Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 194.

contradicted by Bellori, whose as yet unsubstantiated report says that the young Caravaggio 'got into trouble and had to leave Milan.'⁹⁵

Connections between the violence in Caravaggio's life and that depicted in his art are even more difficult to establish. Perhaps the resurrection of Lazarus had personal meaning for him, but that subject was a natural commission from his patrons, the Lazzari family.⁹⁶ *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist* has written in blood '{Michelan ...,' which could mean either 'Fra Michel Angelo,' signifying that Caravaggio 'was already a Knight of Malta,' or 'done by Caravaggio,' suggesting that he thought of himself as 'in some way responsible for the murder.'⁹⁷

Theories of Art

One reason for the thinness of the seicento accounts is that Caravaggio arrived in Rome at a time when artists had lost interest in theorizing. Vasari's notion 'that art progressed by means of the solution of one quasi-technical problem after another [eventually produced] the feeling ... that painting had got into a blind alley.'⁹⁸ The story of art after Michelangelo had to be told 'either in terms of decline and corruption or in terms of some new miraculous rescue'; thus 'Caravaggio was naturally cast in the role of the seducer and the Carracci as the restorer of the arts.'⁹⁹ If nobody described his *tenebroso* in Wittkower's terms – 'light isolates; it creates neither spaces nor atmosphere' – that is because such a description does not readily fit into this historical model.¹⁰⁰

Caravaggio's site-specific effects analyzed by Steinberg raise similar problems. The 'brutal foreshortenings' in the Cerasi Chapel, Steinberg argues, are due 'wholly to our standpoint and distance The irreverence implied in the forced distortion of sainted figures vanishes as soon as we consent to keep the altar at a decorous distance.'¹⁰¹ Bellori indicates one simple reason he did not respond to such effects in the Contarelli Chapel: 'The darkness ... makes it difficult to see the pictures.'¹⁰² But perhaps Steinberg's sensitivity to site-specific effects depends upon his experience of late modernism. Do we now see Caravaggio's paintings better than his contemporaries saw them, or do we only see them differently? Perhaps these are not genuine alternatives.

⁹⁵ Rudolf and Margot Wittkower, *Born under Saturn* (New York, 1969), 195; Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies*, 119; Moir, *Caravaggio*, ii.

⁹⁶ Gregori, in Gregori et al., *Age*, 338.

⁹⁷ Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 171; Gash, *Caravaggio*, 97. On 18 November 1604, Caravaggio got into trouble because he said to a policeman, 'Ti ho in culo'; are these words revealing about his sexuality? See Banks's discussion in *The Caravaggio Obsession*.

⁹⁸ Mahon, 'Some Aspects,' 41.

⁹⁹ E. H. Gombrich, *Norm and Form* (London, 1966), 101.

¹⁰⁰ Wittkower, *Art*, 54.

¹⁰¹ Steinberg, 'Observations,' 186–88. Perhaps there is some vague anticipation of this analysis in Bellori's remark that Caravaggio called the color blue 'poison'; 'what he needed were colours and colour-relations which would pull his figures and objects forward toward the spectator' (quoted in Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies*, 16). Marangoni noted in 1922 that the oblique composition in the Cerasi Chapel was obtained by 'a kind of circular bond of the horse and rider, reversed by the light which gives the illusion of the depth by the placement of the two figures on two diagonals' (quoted in Joffroy, *Le dossier*, 164). See also T. H. Fokker, *Roman Baroque Art: The History of a Style* (Oxford 1938), 103: 'The natural world draws its emphatic limits so closely around the looming horse and the awe-struck man that it brings the supernatural world uncomfortably near.' Fokker does not identify what interests Steinberg, 'the projected illusion ... of a painted figure invading our own ambience, painted space overflowing into, offering to envelop, the area of our motor experience.'

¹⁰² Quoted in Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies*, 249.

These modern interpretations reveal the art historians' reliance upon humanism as described in a justly renowned essay by Panofsky: 'The humanist ... has to engage in a mental process of a synthetic and subjective character ... mentally to re-enact the actions and to recreate the creations ... reproducing and thereby quite literally realizing.'¹⁰³ Thus, 'those who wish to look below the surface of [a painter's] art and discover its secret sources, must do their best to penetrate his intentions and read his thoughts while pondering on his acts.'¹⁰⁴ Humanists invoke a Cartesian argument. Mental states are private, known directly only by the person who experiences them. There is only a difference of degree between inferring from his facial expression that my friend feels pain and re-creating Caravaggio's inner states by studying his art. The re-creation of Caravaggio's mental states aims to be unambiguous. He was either homosexual or not, either a believer or not, although in practice the incompleteness of the evidence means that we can never be sure which.

Humanism is rejected by various recent philosophers. If 'interpretation is nothing more ... than the activity by which we attempt to construe something as an action,' then Caravaggio as artwriters describe him is 'not an historical person whose states of mind' we can 'hope or even want to recapture': 'There is no single best narrative What is best is always determined in light of different background assumptions, interests, and values; and none of these can make an exclusive claim to being perfectly and objectively valid.'¹⁰⁵ When Caravaggio's actual birthdate was discovered and the archival evidence about the Contarelli Chapel found, every earlier account had to be revised. He was not as precocious as had been believed. But in accounts of his psychology, possible political sympathies, religious beliefs, and visual quotations, appeals to the facts are less decisive. For the humanist, the artist's life contains 'a principle of unity,' and his life is expressed in his art, so that 'any unevenness of production is ascribed to changes caused by evolution, maturation, or outside influence Governing this function is the belief that there must be ... a point where contradictions are resolved.'¹⁰⁶ If Caravaggio's early 'homoerotic' works seem inconsistent with his late religious pieces, that change must be explained by some change in his beliefs.

Humanist narrators occasionally reveal themselves by glossing over facts or contradicting themselves in the course of trying to achieve a consistent narrative. According to Sandrart, when D'Arpino refused to duel Caravaggio because the latter was not a knight, Caravaggio went to Malta to become one and returned in haste 'to settle his score with Arpino,' a haste that produced 'a high fever,' the cause of his premature death.¹⁰⁷ Knowing that Caravaggio became a knight in Malta and died of fever, but not the details of his troubles on that island or his later work in Sicily and Naples, Sandrart constructs a seemingly plausible narrative from incomplete data.

¹⁰³ Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Garden City, N.Y., 1955), 14. Thus Fry praises an artwriter who 'does not merely see what there is in a work of art, but ... knows what mental conditions in the artist's mind are implied by that configuration' (Fry, *Transformations*, 121).

¹⁰⁴ Hinks, *Caravaggio*, 86.

¹⁰⁵ Alexander Nehamas, 'What an Author Is,' *Journal of Philosophy* 83 (1986): 685-91, and *Nietzsche* (Cambridge, 1985), 27, 100.

¹⁰⁶ Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. D. F. Bouchard (Ithaca, 1977), 128. One art historian who has developed this argument is Rosalind Krauss; see her *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (New York, 1977), 256; and *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, 1985), 25.

¹⁰⁷ Quoted in Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 379.

Hibbard's much more accurate book suggests that 'the report of Caravaggio's Roman crime alone might have been the cause of his downfall, since men convicted of homicide were not allowed to become Knights of St John.'¹⁰⁸ But Caravaggio was never convicted of homicide. Bellori says that he escaped alone from Malta, an account contradicted by one modern historian, who says that 'the knights helped him to escape from this impregnable fortress in order to avoid the embarrassment of having to punish ... so famous a painter.'¹⁰⁹ Here the seicento account is overruled because it seems implausible.

Peter Watson's popular novel employs the humanist's procedures in a more literal way, re-creating the artist's thoughts just before he was beaten in Naples: 'Caravaggio ... was sitting at a table drinking It was a warm, sticky evening The white, somewhat sour Neapolitan wine had brought a beaded ring of sweat to his hairline.'¹¹⁰ All these imagined details make the scene seem real. Bellori says only that Caravaggio 'found himself surrounded by several armed men who manhandled him and gashed his face.'¹¹¹ Watson suggests that Caravaggio was on the run from the Roman police, the Maltese Knights, and the friends of Runuccio Tommassoni, whom he had killed in Rome. The Knights might have sought revenge, particularly if they had not helped him escape from Malta. But the Roman police are Watson's invention, as is the suggestion that Tommassoni's friends sought revenge by inflicting a gash akin to 'the fatal one [Caravaggio] inflicted on Tommassoni.'

Sandrart, Hibbard, and Watson all tie together the details of Caravaggio's life, providing as many connections as possible between the painter's life and his art. For the humanist, the multiplicity of plausible interpretations ought to be positively dismaying: as only one account can correctly re-create the artist's mental states, there can be only one true interpretation. But once we reject humanism, we can recognize that a plurality of plausible and original interpretations, all true to the facts, are possible.

If the seicento commentators and modern artwriters describe Caravaggio differently, who is right? There are two possible answers to this question. As the tools of the modern artwriter were unavailable in Caravaggio's time, perhaps our Caravaggio is an altogether different figure from Bellori's. Maybe Winckelmann's theory of classical art, Kantian aesthetics, novelists' discovery of the inner monologue, the birth of the museum, the use of photographic reproductions, and the professionalization of art history are necessary preconditions for interpreting Caravaggio as we do. But perhaps when properly interpreted the older texts are as sophisticated as the modern accounts. Jacques Derrida's essay 'Plato's Pharmacy' may help explain what Poussin meant when he claimed that Caravaggio was destroying painting: 'The origin of difference and division, the *pharmakos* represents evil both introverted and projected. Beneficial insofar as he cures ... harmful insofar as he incarnates the powers of evil.'¹¹² The trouble with perfect imitations is that 'the imitator

¹⁰⁸ Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 235.

¹⁰⁹ Gash, *Caravaggio*, 27. Since escape was difficult, 'everything points to one explanation: connivance ... at the highest level'. According to John Azzopardi, *The Church of Saint John in Valletta* (Malta, 1978), 24, Wignacourt himself 'provided rope, boat and passport.'

¹¹⁰ Peter Watson, *The Caravaggio Conspiracy* (Garden City, N.Y., 1984), 110.

¹¹¹ Quoted in Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies*, 251.

¹¹² Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. B. Johnson (Chicago, 1981), 133. See also Louis Marin, *Détruire la peinture* (Paris, 1977), 141. For the traditional view of the relation between Poussin and Caravaggio, see René Julian, 'Poussin et la Caravaggisme,' in *Nicolas Poussin*, ed. A. Chastel (Paris, 1960), 225–31.

would [then] become another being no longer referring to the imitated'; in language closer to Bellori's, a perfect image would not be an artwork.

Here... how we understand the relation between early and modern artwriting depends upon our interpretation of the early accounts. Once we admit that such texts, like novels or philosophical treatises, can be variously interpreted, then this point becomes obvious. The humanist's attempt to present a uniquely correct re-creation of the artist's mental states is futile because artwriting itself is a form of representation. The previous chapter described the interpretation of individual works of an artist whose life we know very little about. The present chapter has discussed the interpretation of an artist whose art can be linked to his life because we have some knowledge of his personality. A third way to interpret is to compare and contrast artworks by different artists within a tradition...